

PART IX: From the Mast – Setting Sail on the Bay ^{1/2}

Bay in the Balance



By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

The Pilgrims were the pioneers of sailing in Duxbury Bay. They set sail to get from here to there, and it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that they sailed to live as their heirs would for at least two more centuries.

Today Duxbury has more than its share of residents who live to sail, and it was that tradition that prompted some of the first yacht racing in American history.

The popularity of recreational sailing here gave rise to the Duxbury Yacht Club, founded in 1875, that became the catalyst for organized racing on the bay. In 1879, the club sponsored the town's first union regatta from its Winsor Wharf clubhouse. Racing became part of daily life in Duxbury with the club offering big prizes and sponsoring free after-sailing events.



Inter Clubs head for the windward mark at the 2001 Frostbite Association's national regatta.

Photo by D. Grossman

Then in 1881, the yacht club began to decline "and in a few years ceased to exist," wrote Frank and Margaret Lawson in their book, *Duxbury Bay*. It did not, however, mean the end of sailing clubs or racing.

In 1882, the Standish Shore Association organized a new club at the Standish Springs Hotel and the regattas continued in full force, including a special event in 1892 for the "Opening of Gurnet Bridge." On that day four classes of races competed; there were

sloops and catboats, center-board spritsails, keel spritsails and dories.

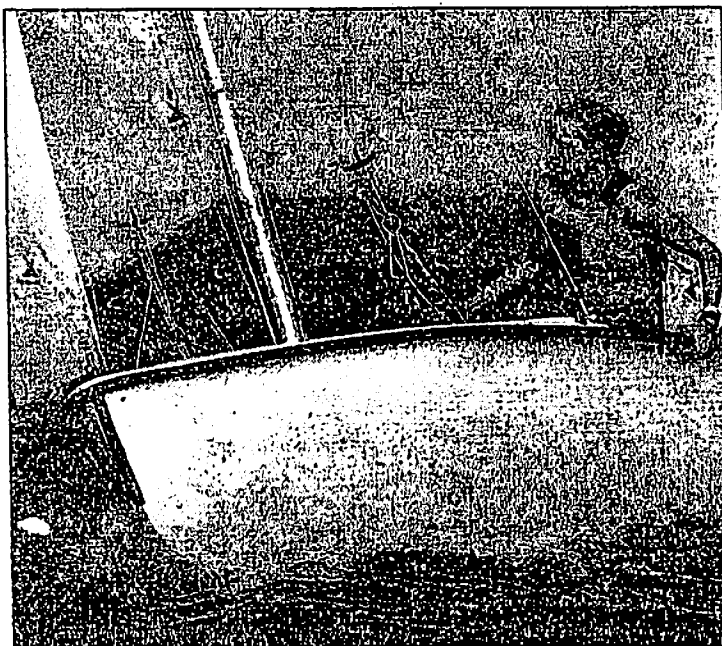
"The Standish Shore Association had acted as an interim organization between the old Duxbury Yacht Club and the present one incorporated in 1895," wrote the Lawsons. Over the next century, the club survived numerous hurricanes and nor'easters. During the Great Depression the club actually operated in the black while many other yacht clubs went into bankruptcy, wrote David Mittell Sr., in his book, *The Duxbury Yacht Club Story*.

As early as 1911, the yacht club sponsored women's only racing with 18 and 15-footer classes competing, and the first mixed-pair races were held in 1926. By then, the clubhouse had moved twice, first to the end of Freeman Place in 1896, and later to Mattakeesett Court "Their racing fleet was grow-

ing fast when the Duxbury Yacht Club moved to Mattakeesett Court in 1913," said the Lawsons.

Until then, the club's inventory included Class I 18-footers, Massachusetts Bay 15-footers, and 14-foot catboats, most designed and built by George Shiverick at his shipyard on the banks of the Jones River in Kingston. A new class of boats, the Bay Birds, a jib-and-mainsail class, joined the racing fleet by 1916 and became the first one-design class in Duxbury.

Around 1923, the club realized the need for a boat that children could sail, and club members bought some 12-foot, gaff-rigged catboats, designed and built by John N. Beetle. "The fleet, called Bugs in Duxbury, was enlarged from time to time," and remained popular in the bay until the mid-1980s, said the Lawsons.



Issac Stoner and Eleanor Lawson race 420s on the bay.

Photo by David Grossman

Leg

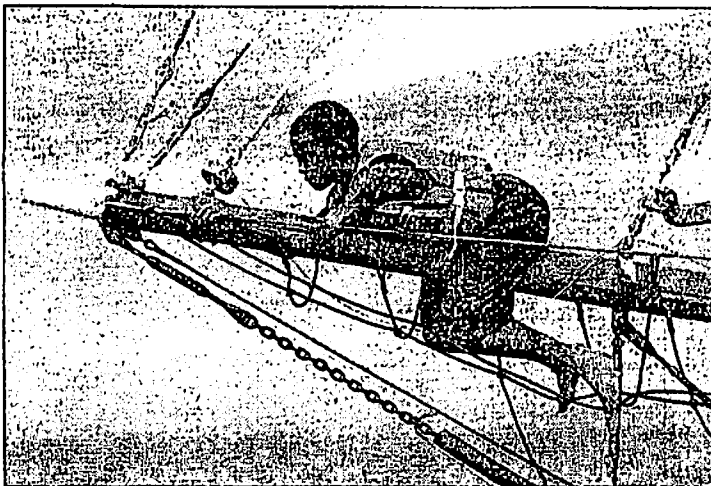
Today, the Duxbury Yacht Club, lead by its first female commodore, Phyllis Gleason, continues its passion for racing and teaching younger members the skills of seamanship.

"We have a racing committee of about 19 people, all volunteer members, who run the racing program from June to October," said committee chair Chuck Leonard. The club encourages public participation in its Saturday races, which attract 50 sailing enthusiasts a week. "Sailing is such an inclusive activity," said Harriot Leonard, noting that kids come from neighboring towns to participate in the club's races.

The Junior Sailing program,

available to members between the ages of 8 to 18, enrolled 115 kids this summer, said program co-chair Gale Willauer. The fleet includes Optis and 420s, but "Beatle Cats are making a comeback," said Chuck Leonard who noted the yacht club would host the National Beatle Cats Regatta next summer.

Some members are buying



A Camp Wing camper balances precariously on the *Aeries*, a schooner used by the DBMS as part of its summer Maritime Adventures program.

Photo by David Grossman

their own 12-foot, wooden Beatle Cats and lending them to the club for teaching. "They can't capsize and they have a big sail, so they can really teach kids things like anchoring and making a landing at a dock," said Willauer.

The club has produced some serious racers over the years. "In 1997, we sent kids to the Nationals," said Willauer. And though the club offers competitive racing, its focus is still on enjoyment. "We really want the kids to be out on the water, to feel safe out there, and have fun," she said.

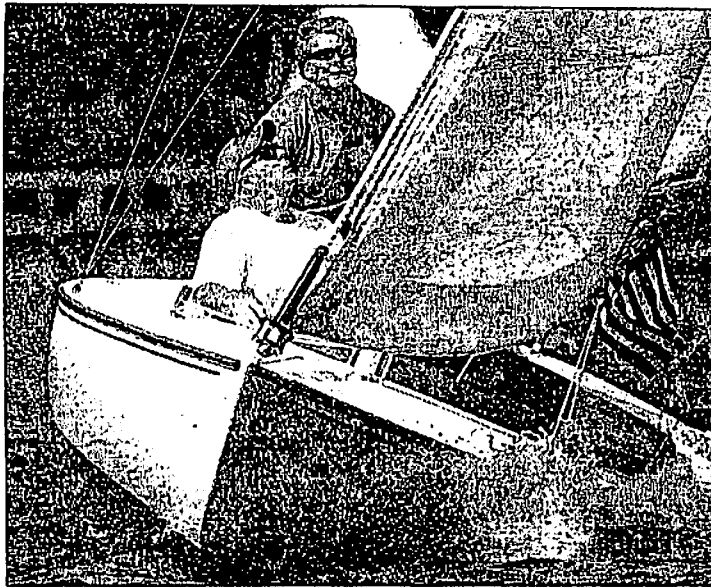
Enter The DBMS

Today, another organization vies for recognition as a paramount community sailing program. And since its inception in 1998 the Duxbury Bay Maritime School (DBMS) has connected the public to the bay through sailing, racing, rowing, and a marine ecology program that is part of a partnership with the New England Aquarium.

The concept of a maritime school was hatched in a parking lot in 1996 when Ned Lawson, DBMS's current executive director, and Sherman Hoyt, another life long yacht club member, began discussing the need for a junior sailing program that would be open to all Duxbury.

At the time, a two-acre parcel on Duxbury Harbor was on the market. "I was worried that the acres could fall into the hands of a developer who would not want to use the property for what I think is its best use—connecting our community to the sea," said Lawson. Hoyt actively pursued the idea with Lawson, and soon other residents, including Fred Clifford, came aboard to launch what would become a successful, non-profit sailing school.

In 1998, the organization acquired a two-plus acre boat yard with a \$850,000 grant from the Ellison Foundation, and then began the task of renovation, staffing, and buying a fleet of small sailboats — Flying Scots, Prams and OPTIS. Mike Horn, a sailing coach at Harvard University for 35 years, became the first executive director. That same year, the school's sailing programs attracted 450 children and adults.



Skipper Sean Dahlen and mate Steve Woodworth sail a Pintail 25, designed and built at Snug Harbor Yachts. *Photo by David Grossman*

Windward

This summer, DBMS connected 1,500 students, ranging in age and ability, to the bay. Its ACCESSSAIL program, piloted in 2001, allowed 100 disabled children and adults to experience sailing on Duxbury Bay.

"We're in the process of modifying a second O'Day for people who need trunk support by creating an enormous cockpit for seats and straps so the person won't fall out of the boat," said Lawson. The fleet also includes two Marshall 16s (purchased through a grant from Missy and Marsh Carter), which are specifically designed for disabled sailors.

The school also offers a special maritime program for Camp Wing in West Duxbury that is operated by Cross Road for Kids and financed primarily through grants and private donations. DBMS relies heavily on grants and private donations to run its programs and keep fees affordable. "We need a couple hundred thousand dollars a year in order to make ends meet, and we have two principal fund-raisers a year to help us," said Lawson. This year DBMS raised \$80,000 from its Opening of the Bay event.

It hosts the Duxbury High School Sailing team that just completed its third season with a record of 10-3, and qualified for the New England H.S. Championships. Last spring, Plymouth High School launched its own sailing team at DBMS. And a newly formed rowing program is now attracting students and adding another dimension to the school's programs. DBMS and the Duxbury Yacht Club also work together with shared racing events with some 75 kids racing weekly during the summer.

In five years, DBMS has made enormous strides as a

maritime presence in the community. "Someone once accused DBMS as being the 'Microsoft of the Sailing World,' and what they meant was we have soaked up all the good sailing instructors," said Lawson who noted that his current staff includes 30 instructors for the Junior Program. "We attract good instructors because we pay well and we get people who really bond with the kids," he said.

It's success and growth is a double edge sword, however, as the current facilities have become inadequate. DBMS plans to develop and improve the William P. Ellison Campus to include new classrooms and administrative space, to erect a maintenance and storage facility for 100 boats, and to build a residential space for a future executive director and instructors. The new campus will allow DBMS to serve a greater audience, to become completely handicap accessible, and provide sailing to those who might not otherwise have experienced the bay.

"It's the generosity of this community which has enabled us to grow," said Lawson. "Without it we would just be a standard variety community sailing club with beat up boats and not a campus."

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The Frostbiters

To describe Jack and Jeanne Clark as mere sailing enthusiasts would be akin to saying Foster Cass is interested in soccer—a gross understatement.

The Clarks, Surplus Street residents for many years, are wild supporters of the sailing scene in Duxbury and, when talking about racing, will bubble over, often completing each other's sentences.

During a recent interview, the conversation took a quick and frosty turn to the fall of 1958—the year the Frostbiter was introduced to Duxbury.

"No story on Duxbury's sailing would be complete without a discussion of the Frostbiters," said Jack. "It's the best thing that ever happened in this town."

Clark should know. He initiated the racing legacy with other sailing legends such as Jim Fitzgibbons, Jim Queeny, Al Paradis, Lance Bennett, Bill Regio and Lou Tura.

The research on this unusual society arrived in a large box, labeled "The Frostbiters," which the Clarks dropped off one weekend. Inside were three well-kept, thick, leather-bound albums that had been maintained by the society's



Winter Fun — In February 1965 a group of hardy frostbiters prepare to launch an Interclub Dinghy (Frostbite archives)

September with the Bug Light Race from the banks of the Bluefish River where sailors jockeyed for prime position prior to the race. The rules, they said, were that "there are none, until after the first marker where the rules of water apply." Tradition has it that as each sailor rounded Bug Light, someone in an approaching powerboat would toss a bottle of champagne into the bow—a necessity for the "cold, wet and bumpy 8.5 mile finish."

After three decades of racing, the Frostbite Society lost its momentum and ended in the mid-eighties. Today, there are still some remnants of the old society. Many



On a chilly February day, Frostbiters launch another dinghy behind Bayside Marine.

historians. It was a time capsule of nearly 30 years of winter racing complete with photographs, newspaper clippings, letters and cards — all tracking the Duxbury phenomenon in which neither snow nor blustery winds kept sailors from their beloved bay. The Frostbiters of Duxbury were a most interesting group.

On November 11, 1958, the Frostbite Society, then comprising 27 sailors, launched dinghies into the bay for the first time after ceremoniously rubbing black and white scotch on the bows. Their Interclub Dinghies, designed by Sparkman and Stephens, became the most continuously sailed class of boats (other than Bugs) on Duxbury Bay.

As the society's popularity grew, a weekly column, the Frostbite News written by Dr. Lansing Bennett, appeared in the *Duxbury Clipper*. It announced racing scores and events, among other things, and was spiced with wit and some friendly digs at some of the hardest sailors ever known to Duxbury.

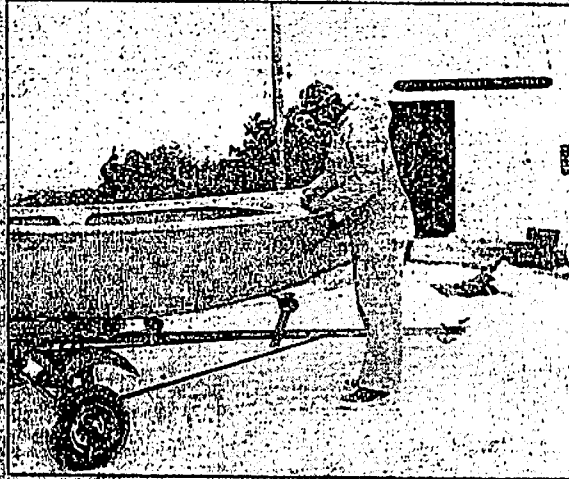
The Frostbiters' clubhouse consisted of a battery shack behind Jack Kent's Bayside Marine. The trophies were a step up, however. For the Annual Spring Regatta, the coveted trophy was a silver tray donated by American Cup sailor Arthur "Artie" Knapp Jr. of Larchmont, New York, who helped organize the society's fleet and often raced in its regattas.

The society opened each season in

Duxbury winter sailors belong to the Scituate Frostbite Association (S.F.A.) that continues the traditional Bug Light Race, including the champagne bottle tossing.

This year's *Farmer's Almanac* promises serious frost, perhaps it's a good time to revive the Duxbury Frostbite Society. In January, sailors won't have to contend with parking problems at Matrakeeset Court or crowds of boats on the bay. And, there's still some empty pages left in those leather albums, not to mention a Clipper feature writer whose pen is just waiting to resurrect the Frostbite News column!

— By DEBORA BABIN KATZ



An unidentified Frostbiter preps his craft for sail. Behind him is the Frostbite headquarters, a battery shack behind Bayside Marine. (Frostbite archives)